United Nations E/CN.5/2000/NGO/5

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
3 February 2000

Original: English

Commission for Social Development

Thirty-eighth session
8-17 February 2000
Item 3 of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development

Statement submitted by the American Association of Retired Persons, Caritas Internationalis (International Confederation of Catholic Charities), the International Council on Social Welfare, the International Council of Women, the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres, the International Federation on Ageing, the International Movement ATD Fourth World, non-governmental organizations in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; the International Federation for Home Economics, the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, the World Movement of Mothers, the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Council; and the Armenian International Women's Association and the Armenian Relief Society; non-governmental organizations on the Roster of the Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The signatory non-governmental organizations (NGOs) listed above are active participants in the NGO Committee on the Family. As Governments and NGOs meet for the Commission for Social Development this year, we would like to call attention to the issues of concern to the family, the basic unit of society. This is in keeping with General Assembly resolution 52/81 of 12 December 1997, which affirmed that "follow-up to the International Year of the Family should be an integral part of the multi-year programme of the work of the Commission for Social Development". Mainstreaming of family issues in all discussions for social development remains vital.

The Preparatory Committee for the Special Session of the General Assembly on the Implementation of the Outcome of the World Summit for Social Development and Further Initiatives stated in its report on its first session that the World Summit for Social Development insisted that people must be at the centre of sustainable development and that, therefore, people must have the right and ability to participate fully in the economic, political and social life of their societies.[1]

As the Preparatory Committee plans for the General Assembly's special session in June 2000, to review the five-year progress of the Copenhagen Summit for Social Development, we, the NGO signers of this statement, wish to highlight key goals for the basic unit of all societies, the family:

* E/CN.5/2000/1.

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(1) Assuring that Governments maintain and implement the commitments made in Copenhagen to protect the family and to increase access to sustainable livelihoods for all families;

(2) Advocating, especially in accord with the emphasis rightly given to eradicating poverty, that disadvantaged families be a priority of this protection and this access to livelihoods. In addition, priority must be given to developing universally acceptable social indicators which will measure meaningful progress of families' lives. As stated by the Preparatory Committee at its first session: "Recognizing that efforts to eradicate poverty are necessarily long-term ... nevertheless ... progress to reach this goal has been erratic and slow, and well over a billion people still live in abject poverty. Poverty eradication must remain central to all development strategies and in policy-making at all levels. The approach should be holistic, multi-pronged and broad-based".[2] It is of paramount importance that we continually strive to maintain the goal of "basic social services for all.";

(3) Urging that the further initiatives taken by Governments and civil society provide income sufficient for families, through sustainable, decent and freely chosen employment, whether in agriculture, commerce or industry, in order to advance the third pillar of Copenhagen, social integration of family members in their own community and culture.

While progress in social development has been made in some areas in the past five years, the growing gap between rich and poor has widened for many of the 4.4 billion people in the developing nations. These families lack adequate food, clean water and basic sanitation. Their housing is sub-standard, and access to health services and schooling is non-existent or meagre. In these conditions, clearly, the role of natural adult support to nurture children is severely compromised or made impossible.

As NGOs dedicated to supporting the efforts of very poor families to survive and to keep their families together, we are particularly concerned by measures taken that tend to separate family members solely because of their poverty. In countries in all parts of the world, whether industrialized, developing or those with economies in transition, polices have been observed that tend to separate family members, for example when arranging emergency shelter for the homeless, or when identity papers are not in order. In countries with more funding for social services, poor children too often languish in foster or institutional care, as funds are cut for the preventative programmes that could keep families intact. Even in a well-developed country, *The New York Times* reports:

> "Of the children who end up in foster care, almost every family is poor. ... Most children, especially those who have not been seriously neglected, are severely hurt by the loss of their family. ... Moreover, three-quarters of all children in foster care are returned to their parents within three years. This statistic raises serious questions. Did the children need to be removed in the first place? And were they returned as quickly as they could have been?"[3]

This article, referring to the situation in one country, is also very relevant to other industrialized countries, as well as to the countries with less funding, but which are nevertheless aiming to emulate these policies. Their disastrous results for many poor children deserve greater attention, leading to restraint and more emphasis on preventive services.

We would also like to commend a positive initiative. "Education, communication and information technology and families" was the area examined at the 1998 United Nations workshop on technology and families, held in Dublin. Its conclusions specifically stated, "The family is more than a primary source of education. Its more significant role is in providing children with important initial sets of values. The first relates to social interaction, where the family provides both examples and a discussion forum in which learning can occur. The second relates to those concerning the value of education, which sows the seeds of life-long learning. Life-long learning must begin in the home".[4] This workshop was organized by the Family Unit of the Secretariat of the United Nations, which plays a significant role as facilitator for global efforts on behalf of families and which should be reinforced by the Commission.

The collaboration and cooperation of NGOs on the regional, national and international level is imperative for achieving goals for the well-being of families throughout the world. We are looking towards all Governments and NGOs to achieve the following additional goals for family-friendly policies, in order to improve everyday life:

- Addressing disability issues as they relate to family needs;
- Maintaining support to families with evolving needs, for example children being taken care of by grandparents or other relatives owing to natural or other disasters;
- Responding to the needs of the ageing population within the family unit.

As emphasized above, eradicating poverty is of primary importance in the efforts to build a family-friendly society and, therefore, in attaining other goals for families around the world.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 45* (A/54/45), annex, part III, para. 1.

[2] *Ibid.*, para. 13.

[3] Guggenheim, Martin, "Sometimes Foster Care is the Easy Way Out", *The New York Times*, 8 July 1998.

[4] United Nations workshop on technology and families, Dublin, 6-10 October 1998 (p. 6, item 37).